

Aiselu Wine in Nepal: A Community Project

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Product Information and Benefits to Nepal

Aiselu

Rubus ellipticus is a yellow raspberry native to the Himalayas ^[14]. Often called Himalayan Raspberry or aiselu, the evergreen berry shrub is thorny and bears fruit similar to a common raspberry plant, with impressive culinary value ^[2]. The plant is known to be rainfall tolerant, mainly growing in 1000-5000 mm/annum rainfall zones ^[11]. Aiselu is also able to grow in various soil types (even degraded, low quality soil) although it prefers well-drained soils ^[14]. Surprisingly, aiselu roots contain nodules, which are able to fix nitrogen, a trait that is valuable in degraded soil. This is a unique ability in a non-legume which can be beneficial to its own growth capabilities but also to that of other species growing in its vicinity ^[2].

Growing between elevations of 2270-5580 feet above sea level ^[9], aiselu is found in the mid Himalayan regions of Nepal, India, China, and other mountainous Asian countries ^[2]. It is often considered a weed that is difficult to control and can be inconvenient for growing other more productive crops as it competes for space ^[16]. The invasiveness of the species is due to its high grow ability and its tendency to be consumed and therefore spread by birds ^[11]. The berries have a rather short shelf life and only grow for about two months of the year (April and May), each bush producing on average 1-2 kg of berries a week ^[12].

Despite its downfalls, however, as wild edible plants go, aiselu has unique potential. Some have found uses for the plant as a hedge or boundary to prevent leaching, run-off and erosion of loose mountain soil ^[11]. It's medicinal and nutritional value (cure for measles and typhoid) is commonly known by local women, yet often overlooked by farmers looking to maximize production of crops they view as more valuable ^[15]. As raspberries including *Rubus ellipticus* require minimal water, nutrient and labour inputs, agronomic researchers are exploring ways to extend the shelf life, increase yield and berry size, and fine-tune the harvesting system

for raspberries in light of the notion that they pertain potential economic value for their native regions ^[3].

Wine Anyone?

Farmers have been successful in making fruit wine in Nepal using various grape types and berries ^[15]. It is known that grapes generally do not grow well at high altitudes in the Himalayas, and importing seedlings can come at a cost that a budding industry cannot yet independently cover ^[8]. Wine from berries is cheaper considering the readily available wild-growing aiselu berry and the knowledge held by farmers in the mid-Himalayan region ^[5].

The process of making wine includes berry collection, mixing with sugar and then fermenting the juice in drums for a month. Research suggests that this process can be altered depending on the type of wine: for example, local knowledge of native plants recognizes multiple wild species with natural fermenting properties ^[15]. Plants such as the bhorla and badahar contain such properties, and can be grown in similar regions as aiselu ^[15]. This kind of knowledge contributes to the authenticity of the wine and prevents the use of processed sugars.

In the past, a small winery processed and sold 12 000 bottles of chutro (a Nepalese fruit) and aiselu wine in one year, at varied prices depending on where the wine was sold ^[5]. Other statistics suggest that the raw, unprocessed berry can generate 3870 Nepali rupees per year by selling 86 kg ^[12]. More ground research is required in order to attain a precise projection of how much to sell a bottle of aiselu wine for in Nepal.

When the industry expands and becomes more stable, there is reason to believe that it can generate enough money to sustain the integration of new technology that will industrialize wine production: increasing the amount produced for export, improving quality and maybe investing in the incorporation of more grapes into the method ^[8]. This could include something state of the art like new irrigation systems, or a simple upgrade from plastic fermentation drums to wood barrels. Eventually, wine makers could become educated in Nepal and as tough labour will be less necessary, trade specialization increases ^[3].

The concept of sustainable wineries in Nepal can be exemplified by data measured in the Chinese Himalaya, where wine production has begun but faces a few detrimental issues^[10]. Marketing is tough when European countries clearly dominate the competitive vineyard industry^[8]. Since most grape types grown for wine are alien to the Himalayas, Chinese vineyards tend to import the same grapes and therefore most products are too monotonous to stand out globally^[7]. Despite its pitfalls, Chinese wines have moved from small local markets to global circulation^[7]. Nepalese wine could mock this process, but having a unique flavour could give it a competitive edge that Chinese wine lacks^[8].

A Community Effort

Community land-shares in Nepal have been endorsed, closely examined and, for the most part, considered successful^[1]. Community based management of local resources is a system that hands over responsibilities of maintaining fisheries, forests, pasture-land and irrigation systems to a group of people (ie. community) when it cannot be privately managed^[1]. Although this can cause rivalry for use of the communal resources, these projects are beneficial for economic growth and ecological sustainability^[1]. These policies have grown in Nepal with means to alleviate poverty and conserve biodiversity mainly in the middle hills^[1]. Given this evidence and the nature of the winemaking process, there is reason to believe that a small Nepalese community can work together to split costs, labour and land to support a functional vineyard. Communal efforts are efficient with a project along these lines: women and children are accustomed to picking the fruit on their farms and making the most of the whole plant. Most knowledge of native species in a community is held by the citizens themselves^[15]. Such ways of operating vineyards have already been successful in the Chinese Himalaya, where land owners cooperate and consider each farmer's interest while implementing policy and sharing resources^[8]. Baden, Germany, a region known for its trademark Pinot, operates community cooperatives which account for 85% of its wine production^[8].

Export Potential

A Matter of Taste

Canadian wine consumers tend to base their preferences on authentic appeal as well as the taste and identity of wine^[8]. While older generations prefer safe, well-known and world-renowned wines, research shows that peoples' taste in wine is shifting: consumers base their choice of wine first off of label and appearance, second by name and third by wine type^[6]. The proof of new-age wine drinkers being more daring in their choices is beneficial for the marketing of Nepalese aiselu wine as Canadian consumers will feel impassioned by its integrity^[6]. Given the production process and demeanor of the sweet, white wine, pulling at the heartstrings of Canadians should not be a difficult venture when marketing aiselu wine from Nepal to new-age wine drinkers.

In the Numbers

As wine accounts for ~1% of the Canadian beverage market, we can tell that Canada consumes more important wine than local^[13]. 77 million litres of wine were imported in bulk form in 2007, along with 200 million litres of bottled wine shelved for direct sale. Wine imports cost over \$1.5 billion, which equaled more than 67% of the market, proving further that Canada depends on imported wine rather than domestic^[13].

Importing Nepalese wine into Canada will be challenging. The quality of Canadian wines has greatly improved, causing the domestic sector to grow^[13]. The competition of the wine market drastically increased with the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, as moving US wine over the border became cheaper and California wine (especially) became a commodity^[4]. This has caused a change in taste profile for consumers^[13].

After demands from the EU the implementation of an Agreement on Trade in Wines and Spirit Drinks, Canada now requires its imported wine to meet the same regulations as its local wines^[13]. This may inhibit the export potential of aiselu wine from Nepal: it is difficult to meet the high health and safety regulations and pricing that the Canadian Government sets in order to foster competition in the market.

Potential Importers

Wine World Importers

“Bringing the Worlds Finest Wines & Spirits to you”

2045 Avenue Road

Toronto, ON

M5M 4A7

(T) 416-487-7147

United Distributors of Canada

#156, 3670 63rd Avenue N.E

Calgary, AB

T3J 0S4

(T) 403-313-5550

The Bacchus Group Inc.

“Importers of wines, spirits and beer across the four Western Canadian Provinces”

Suite #1120, 13560 Maycrest Way

Richmond, British Columbia

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(T) 604- 279- 1500

